

by JESSICA GOOLSBY, Staff writer

An initiative of the Commander, Navy Installations Command aims to reduce the Navy's footprint by 25 percent, but Pax River's focus on "future readiness" seems to place the installation in the "safe zone," at least for now, said Chairman Kevin F. Kelly of the Federal Facilities Advisory Board, which was appointed by Gov. Martin O'Malley (D).

"The governor has charged the Federal Facilities Advisory Board to look at our installations throughout the state and not only consider economic development opportunities ... but to say, 'How can the state help those installations that do so much for our country further their mission?'" Kelly said. "We'll be drafting some recommendations [based on the meeting] for our first quarter report to the governor, and that will go out sometime early in the new year, but frankly, it's apparent that the Navy and the country need you ... it really looks like you all have your act together down here."

During a three-hour roundtable discussion last week, state and local officials joined Sen. Ben Cardin (D-Md.) and Rep. Steny Hoyer (D-Md., 5th) in emphasizing Pax River's economic and technological impact on not only the state but the country. Representatives from the base, the Naval Air Warfare Center Aircraft Division, the Southern Maryland Navy Alliance, The Patuxent Partnership and the St. Mary's and Calvert boards of county commissioners also gave the advisory board insight into what the base means to the surrounding community.

Originally Defense Secretary Leon Panetta was scheduled to attend to be briefed on Pax River activities, but that visit was canceled.

"Pax River is now the center of naval aviation," Hoyer said last Friday. "This base is by far the premier research, development, test and evaluation installation in the world ... and is home to more than 22,000 workers. There is not a community in America that wouldn't kill to get the enterprise of this scope found here. This facility represents our future and it must continue to grow."

Cardin said, “This place is a national treasure. ... The work done at Pax River is unique to the station ... and we want to make sure that this is preserved for the future generations because it is important to our national security.”

Dominick Murray, department secretary for the Maryland Department of Business and Economic Development, said Maryland’s military installations have had an economic impact of nearly \$36 billion for the state in the past year — 7.5 percent of the state’s local economic activity.

“This year alone we’ve produced over 200 new aircraft. We have developed over 30,000 weapons, 500 UAVs [unmanned aerial vehicles], 50 training devices and done 700 aircraft repairs, 1,800 engine repairs, 65,000 component repairs” and more is expected for the coming fiscal year, said Vice Adm. David Architzel, commander of Naval Air Systems Command.

“The uniqueness of Pax River and the fact that this is the largest free-world test and evaluation facility and how people around the country would envy the position that we’re in” is a testament to the vital role the base plays in St. Mary’s County and the state, St. Mary’s County Commissioner Todd Morgan (R) said. “For every job we create here on the base, it creates two jobs out in town, which boils down to 75 percent of St. Mary’s economy being dependent upon this base.

“This is a center of excellence for naval aviation, but simultaneously we acknowledge that there are [military budget] cuts coming. If you don’t grow, you go,” and Pax River continues to grow, he said. “From a commissioner point of view and from a businessman point of view, I am and continue to be a big fan of Pax River.”

Susan Shaw, president of the Calvert County commissioners, added, “Being right across the river from the base, we have very close eyes to the mission, to the personnel who work there and to the technology that spins out and helps further U.S. ingenuity. ... And the small business impact [of Pax River] is very important to us,” with approximately 13 percent of the base’s workforce living in Calvert County.

“It’s those same people who live in Calvert and work at the base at Pax River who also volunteer at our schools, contribute to our tax base, shop at our stores, visit our museum, eat at our restaurants, donate to our charities, attend our churches, participate in our boards, commissions and committees and generally make Calvert County a very pleasant place to live. ... The bottom line is, we are very committed to the base, we partner with the base and we will continue to do that to maintain relationships and strengthen partnerships, working closely with our partners here in St. Mary’s County and in Charles County to ensure the continued success for Pax River.”